

Children and Young People's Services Select Committee

11 September 2019

Children First Programme Update

Report by Director of Children's Services

Summary

This report updates the Committee on developments in the Children First Programme since its last meeting on 17 July 2019. It notes the adoption of the Children First Improvement Plan and its submission to the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted. A digest of the latest achievements in service improvement is provided, including the latest information on recruitment and retention of social work posts.

In terms of the forthcoming period, the report summarises the activities of the Children's Commissioner and looks towards his report to the Secretary of State, due by the end of September, containing his judgement of the ability of children's services in West Sussex to reach a satisfactory standard, and its aftermath.

The report also discusses the emerging Children First Programme, and the steps in hand to create an overarching Children First Strategy, covering the full range of social care and early help services, and the Committee's role in the shaping of the Strategy.

The focus for scrutiny

The Select Committee is requested to:

1. note the adoption and submission of the Practice Improvement Plan (Section 1);
2. note the recent progress in the delivery of service improvements and the positive impacts for service users (Section 2);
3. note the implications that may arise from the report by the Children's Commissioner (Section 3);
4. note the forward programme of Ofsted visits (Section 4), the role of the Practice Improvement Plan (Section 5) and the Children First Programme (Section 6);
5. consider how it proposes to discharge its scrutiny function in relation to the creation of the Children First Strategy (Section 7).

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its most recent meeting on 17 July 2019, this Committee previewed the proposed Children First Practice Improvement Plan and recommended it for adoption. The Cabinet Member agreed to the adoption of the Plan on 06 August and it was then submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education as evidence of the County Council's firm commitment to address

and resolve the 12 issues raised by the Ofsted inspection of February-March 2019.

1.2 As part of this decision, the Cabinet Member also gave commitment, in discussion with the Cabinet, to an Investment Plan to enable the delivery of the Improvement Plan. He also approved the creation of a Children First Strategy to give broad strategic expression to the County Council's aspirations for children, with the proposed strategy to be presented for further consultation and approval in due course, with the intention of launching it in October 2019.

1.3 The intended business planning approach to the Children First agenda is comprised of the following layers:

1. Children First Strategy
2. Practice Improvement Plan
3. Children First Programme

Their respective functions are discussed in further detail in Sections 5-7 below.

2. Update on Service Improvements

Staffing - Vacancy Gap

2.1 The social work staff vacancy gap has continued to fall steadily, and was 5.19% on 12 August, having been 18.5% in February. Vacancy gap predictions depend on a number of variables, and for this purpose it has been assumed (a) there are no more leavers than currently known (including those yet to opt into the Retention package); and (b) that all those starters in the pipeline actually commence work. This calculation currently predicts staffing (including agency cover) at 2.62% over-establishment at the end of December 2019 and 3.02% over-establishment at the end of January 2020.

Agency Workers

2.2 The vacancy gap has been closed in part through the engagement of additional agency resource. On 12 August there are 76.51 FTE Agency social workers covering unfilled vacancies or undertaking additional work to help reduce caseloads; this equates to around 15% of the qualified social worker establishment (509 FTE).

2.3 The use of high quality agency workers remains a key element of policy for the time being, and agency workers are being deployed as whole teams for maximum effectiveness. The long-term intention is to progressively reduce use of agency staff through increasing the proportion of full-time staff. If agency staff were excluded from vacancy gap calculations, the projected vacancy gaps would be 14.57% at the end of August 2019, reducing to 11.27% at the end of September and to 10.88% from the end of October through to the end of January 2020.

Recruitment & Retention Offer

2.4 The take-up rate on the revised recruitment and retention offer at 12 August is 88.5% (389 FTE), having been 85% (360 FTE) in July. This refers to

eligible social workers, including some social workers within IPEH and Safeguarding, as well as Children's Social Care) committing to stay with WSCC for the next 18 months. The numbers also exclude the ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, for newly qualified social workers) that become eligible for the provisions in September, many of whom have indicated a wish to be included. The offer also includes:

- Free car-parking or a financial contribution towards parking. For all those staff that have opted-in and that were seeking parking provision, this is now in place;
- The option of taking a pool car home in certain circumstances. This provision is still to be progressed;
- An interest-free loan of up to £10,000, subject to repayment terms. This offer recently became available with a deadline of 28 August for applications for loans to be paid in September's pay.

It is noteworthy that the previous flow of leavers has significantly slowed and steadied in recent months, giving the service additional stability; there has also been a continued low level of staff absence.

Caseloads

- 2.5 One of the key operational outcomes sought from the recruitment and retention programme is to reduce caseloads to agreed target levels. This will both improve the quality and timeliness of service to customers, and ameliorate working conditions for social workers – leading in turn to better outcomes for recruitment and retention. A further benefit is that staff have more time for professional development. Caseload targets have now been set for all frontline staff and are regularly monitored. Targets will vary between different staff cohorts, and newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in particular have a reduced quota.
- 2.6 A target for which West Sussex will progressively aim is around 18 cases per Qualified Social Worker. In the context of this authority's journey of recovery, it is considered that good progress has been made to date, and this indicator will be a standard feature in future progress and performance reports.

Summary of Recent Achievements across the Service

- 2.7 The following are some highlights in recent service improvement:
- Health Assessments for **Children Looked After (CLA)** are close to full compliance with 4-day standard, with backlog planned to be cleared by the end of September;
 - Improved performance on CLA having a Personal Education Plan (84.5% for school-age CLA children);
 - **Fostering** – continued improvement in compliance; Unannounced visits are at 99% in-time, as are Carer visits;
 - Private Fostering – assessments and visits are all within timescale; profile of service being raised through promotion with partner agencies;

- Foster to Adopt – creating a pathway for early identification of children for whom this form of care is suitable.
- **Family Support & Protection** - Assessments continue to be allocated and seen within 10 days of referral, addressing the delay identified by Ofsted and drawing favourable comment from partners. The Better Change Programme Board in August 2019 reported a significant positive impact across the county, and that communication and information-sharing had significantly improved.
- **Neglect** - Cases are being identified and responded to with greater pace, rising from 93 families to 106 (209 children); Neglect pathways have been agreed which provide clarity as to interventions necessary at each juncture in a child’s journey.
- **MASH** - Online referral form in conjunction with Adults Services has been developed and now launched;
- MASH - Review of contacts that result in ‘no further action’ is in progress, thus improving efficiency.
- **Residential Review** – Working at pace, and expected for Cabinet Member decision in September.

3. The Children’s Commissioner

3.1 The Children’s Commissioner’s role is to bring together evidence to assess the County Council’s capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and to recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care in West Sussex can be achieved, should operational service control continue to remain with the Council. The Children’s Commissioner in West Sussex is John Coughlan, the Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council. The Commissioner is due to report his findings to the Secretary of State by 30 September. He has been actively engaging with key stakeholders in his role since his appointment in May; this has included a meeting with the Chairman of the Select Committee on 9 August.

3.2 A member briefing was held on 17 July: this was an opportunity for all members to hear an update on the Improvement Plan, and to meet the Commissioner; 27 members attended. The morning consisted of an update from the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the Director of Children’s Services on the Improvement Plan. This was followed by a talk by the Commissioner, and a session for members to ask questions on the Improvement Plan. Feedback from the Commissioner and members was very positive, and members felt it gave them a good understanding of the improvement journey.

4. Ofsted Monitoring Visits

5.1 Regardless of the Commissioner’s verdict, Ofsted will commence a sequence of planned monitoring visits, the first being scheduled for 27-28 November 2019. Ofsted inspectors are likely to use these short visits to examine specific aspects of service delivery, including reassessing the 12 topics found to be deficient in the previous inspection. Plans are in place within the service to respond to these visits, which are likely to continue up to 2021 and will culminate in a full re-inspection of the service.

5. The Practice Improvement Plan

- 5.1 As discussed in Section 1 above, the Practice Improvement Plan was submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education at the end of July 2019. Its main role is to demonstrate a firm commitment and action plan for turning around the 12 areas of concern identified by Ofsted. The plan for continuing operational service improvement will be contained in the Children First Programme.

6. The Children First Programme

- 6.1 The Children First Programme is currently in development. It will contain specific projects giving effect to its overarching theme of organisational change. In so doing it will engage the immediate service, the wider Council and stakeholders in its development. The formal sponsor will be the Director of Children's Services, and the individual projects will be led by senior service leaders. These projects are as follows:

- Standards & Practice – Social Care
- Standards & Practice – Early Help
- Workforce & Leadership Development
- Service Model & Process
- Better Use of Technology

The Programme detail is due to be approved by the Children First Programme Board on 19 September 2019.

7. The Children First Strategy

- 7.1 The Cabinet Member has formally endorsed the need for an overarching strategy to be created. This will include all aspects of the County Council's services to young people including the preventative Early Help service for children and families, known as IPEH. A period of consultation with partners and other stakeholders will inform the creation of the Strategy.
- 7.2 The Committee is invited to consider how it would wish to contribute to the Strategy. Depending on the shaping of the governance timetable, a draft of the Strategy could be considered at its meeting on 23 October.

8. Issues for consideration by the Select Committee

- 8.1 The Committee will wish to review the activity in progress, summarised in this report, and form a view of the rigour of the County Council's response to the current situation. The Committee is also invited to discuss its involvement in the preparation of the Children First Strategy.

9. Consultation

- 9.1 The adoption of the Children First Improvement Plan in August was the culmination of much consultation with a broad range of partners and stakeholders. Currently the Children's Commissioner is undertaking extensive stakeholder engagement, as explained in Section 3 above.

10. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
The Commissioner does not find in favour of continued County Council control of children's services.	This likelihood is mitigated by the intense activity in support of service recovery, the adoption of a Practice Improvement Plan, the commitment to substantial financial investment in the service, including the recruitment and retention programme and other substantive improvements, as described in Section 2 above.
The measures to strengthen the workforce are undermined by recruitment difficulties, or a minority of existing staff not signing up to the new retention offer: 11.5% of eligible staff have not so far responded (2.4 above).	The service stance is to remain vigilant to this risk and continue to: engage interim resource, with the intention of only releasing that resource when it is appropriate to do so; plan and implement a refreshed recruitment campaign for permanent social workers; review the recruitment and retention offer take-up and its attractiveness and effectiveness. It is thought that some staff are awaiting further reassurance about reduced caseloads and other improvements, before committing to the scheme.

11. Other Options Considered

- 11.1 In view of the service's journey of recovery to date and the decision by the Children's Commissioner expected at the end of September, the progress described in this report is considered the only course available. The creation of a Children First Strategy affords a fresh opportunity to deliberate service design options and agree future directions of travel. The Strategy will be the subject of a further consultation process in the Autumn.

12. Equality Duty

- 12.1 The service recognises the primary importance of child safeguarding, sound family relationships, good parenting and the nurture of children to fulfil their potential. The provision of the service is based on need, as determined through formal assessment protocols. This need is not explicitly related to formally protected characteristics, but any such characteristic is and will continue (as now) to be respected in compliance with equality principles, and taken into account in the way in which the service is delivered.
- 12.2 In terms of those with a protected characteristic, the service will ensure enablement and support across all relevant categories, and this will both continue and be enhanced through the Children First agenda.

13. Social Value

- 13.1 The Children First agenda and measures for service recovery discussed in this report will directly support improved delivery of the West Sussex Plan

priority to give every child the Best Start in Life. Enhancing the protection of young lives and support for family life will continue to build resilience and social capital, and contribute towards stronger and more effective communities. The implementation of the service improvements will also respect sustainability principles in accordance with the County Council's strategic policies.

14. Crime and Disorder Implications

- 14.1 There are positive implications for Sections 17, 37 and 39 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in the prevention and reduction of crime and anti-social behaviour, and in reducing offending and re-offending by young people, all of which are affected by the progress activity discussed in this report.

15. Human Rights Implications

- 15.1 The County Council has an overriding duty to safeguard the Human Rights of children in need, and this has been recognised in the Children First agenda. The Council is mindful of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – The Right to Respect for Family and Private Life - and has taken relevant factors into consideration in preparing this report. The processing of personal and special category data is subject to the Council's Data Protection Act policies and procedures in relation to discharging the Council's and its partners' legal responsibilities.
- 15.2 The County Council is also mindful of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - which states that all children have the right to be consulted and to have their opinions heard on any decision that affects them. Hearing, understanding and acting upon the voice and experiences of the child is a key design principle of the Children First service improvements.

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